Acadiana Sky

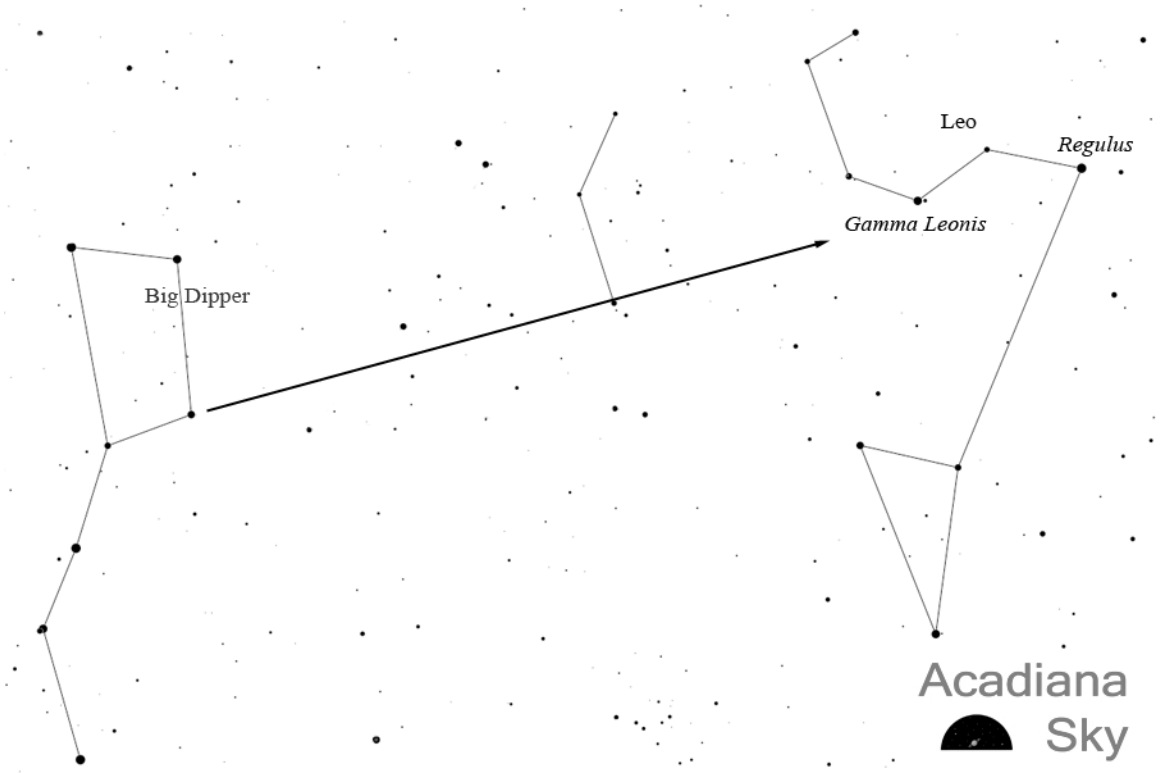
Gamma Leonis

Find this part of the sky using Acadiana Sky Star Maps

What It Is

Gamma Leonis is a binary star, two stars orbiting each other. "Gamma" means that it is the 3rd brightest star in the constellation Leo.

Where It Is



First, find the Big Dipper. Follow the line connecting the two stars at the back of the Dipper's cup, more or less away from the North Star (out of this image to the left). That line will take you toward the bright star Regulus, passing Gamma Leonis on the way. The faint star on the chart near Gamma Leonis is *not* part of the Gamma Leonis system.

Why It's Cool

Easily seen with the unaided eye, a telescope is required to see this star's binary nature. Both stars are actually considerably larger and more luminous than the sun, orbiting a common center of gravity in roughly 500 years. Small as it looks in a telescope, the distance between the components is more than 5 times the distance from the sun to Neptune. Gamma Leonis is about 130 light years from the solar system.

Acadiana Sky

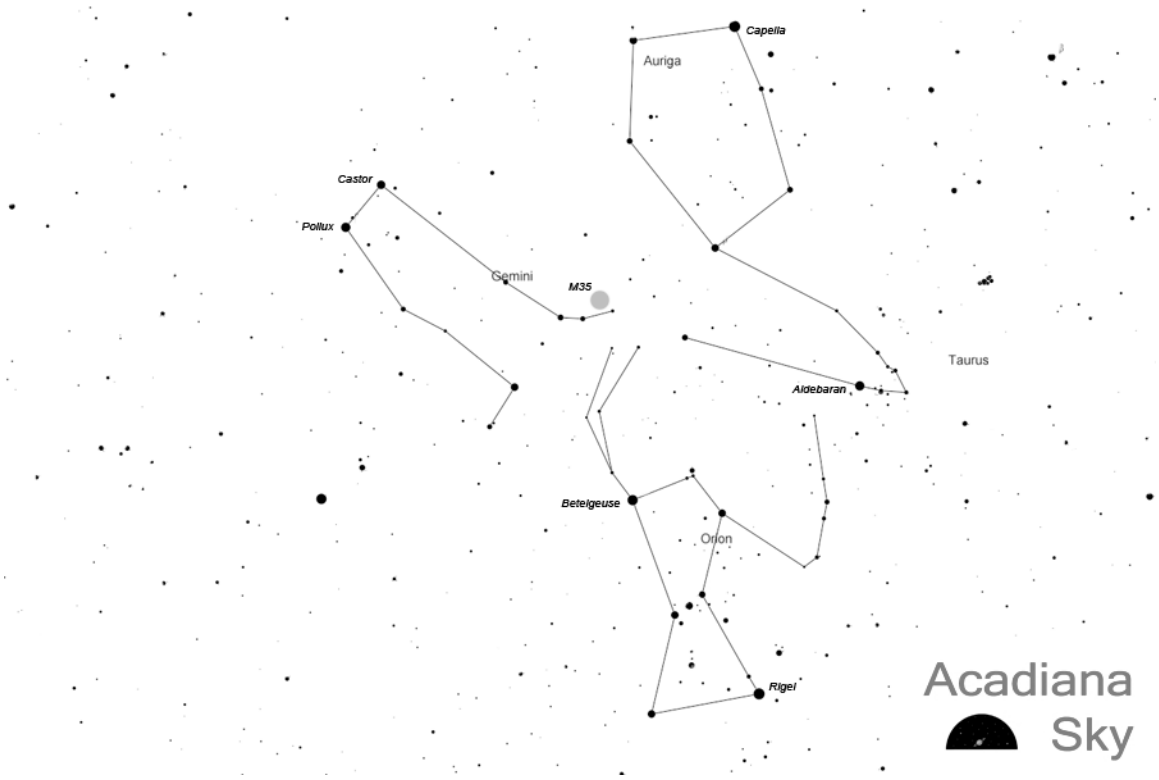
Messier 35

Find this part of the sky using Acadiana Sky Star Maps

What It Is

Messier 35 is an open star cluster, sometimes also called a galactic star cluster. Think of it as a "family" of stars, born together and moving through space together.

Where It Is



Look for the bright constellation Orion, the Hunter. A line from the star Rigel past Betelgeuse takes you to Gemini. Find the three stars near M35. M35 will appear as a faint smudge in a lensed finder, or point a finder with no lens in the area near those stars. As always, use your lowest-power eyepiece while trying to locate M35, then shift to higher powers later.

Why It's Cool

Almost 4000 light years distant, M35 has over 400 member stars. Its nature was discovered by telescope in 1745, but it can also be seen with the unaided eye as a very faint smudge on very clear, very dark nights far from lights. Larger telescopes may also show a fainter, smaller, rounder star cluster near the edge of M35, and that's the cluster NGC 2158 at a distance of roughly 14,000 light years.

Acadiana Sky

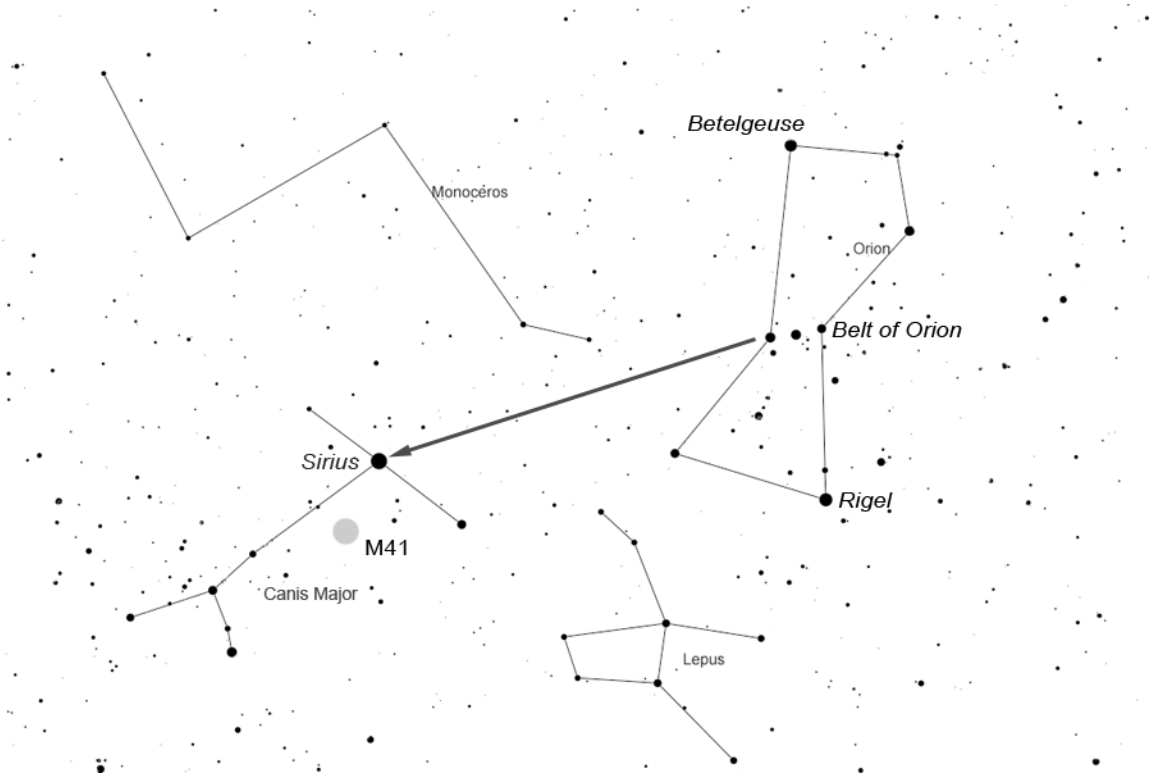
Messier 41

Find this part of the sky using Acadiana Sky Star Maps

What It Is

M41 is a fine example of an open star cluster, a "family" of stars born together and moving through space together. Objects like M41are also sometimes called galactic star clusters.

Where It Is



Follow the line of the Belt of Orion to Sirius, also known as The Dog Star because it is the brightest star in Canis Major, the Larger Dog. Use binoculars or a lensed finder to locate M41 below Sirius. It will look like a faint smudge, but in a low-power telescope, it will dissolve into dozens of stars! It's an excellent star cluster, and an easy one to find.

Why It's Cool

This group of about 100 stars can be seen as a smudge with the unaided eye on clear, dark nights far from lights. Lying at a distance of 2300 light years, the light we see from it has been traveling that long to get to us and we are seeing these stars as they were 2300 years ago. The cluster is about 25 light years in diameter, and has an estimated age of 190 million years, relatively young by the standards of open star clusters! Look for a few red stars near the cluster's center. M41 can be seen in binoculars, but is best in a telescope.

Acadiana Sky

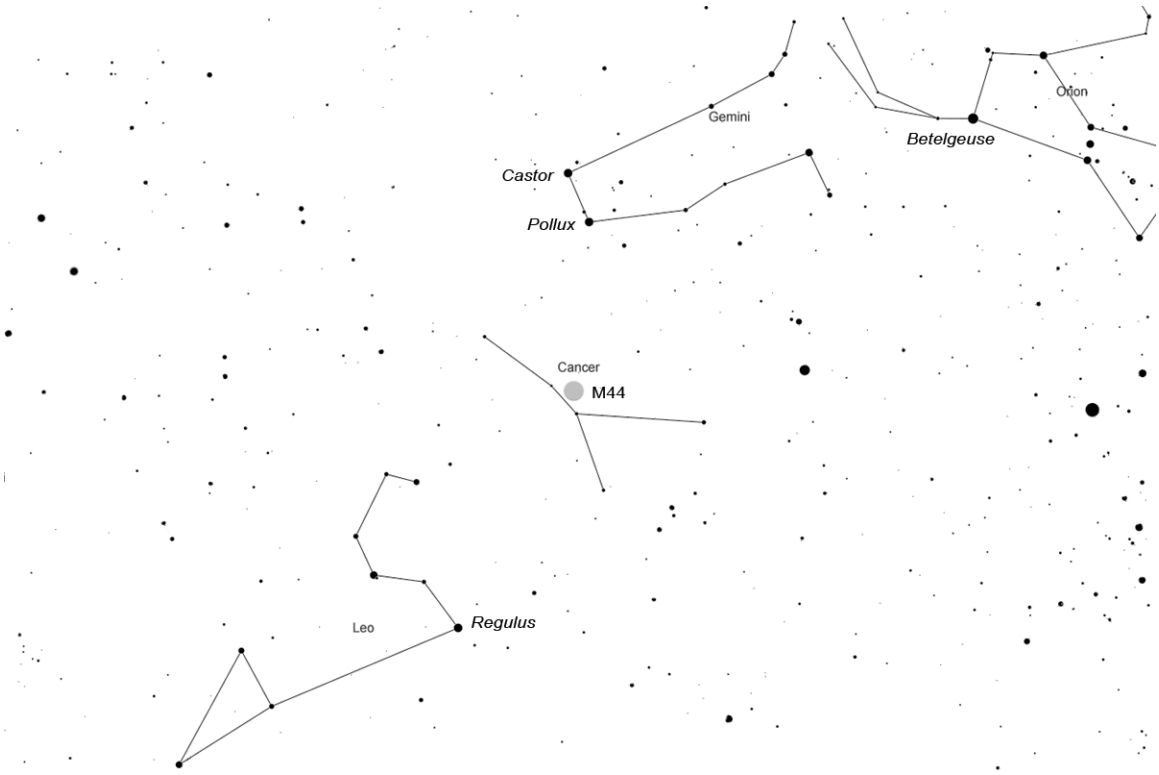
Messier 44

Find this part of the sky using Acadiana Sky Star Maps

What It Is

M44 is an open star cluster, a "family" of stars born together and moving through space together. Objects like M44 are also sometimes called galactic star clusters.

Where It Is



Find the bright stars Castor and Pollux in Gemini, the Twins, which is not far from Orion, the Hunter. Then locate the bright star Regulus in Leo, the Lion. M44 is roughly halfway between Pollux and Regulus, visible to the unaided eye if you are far from lights. It's easy to spot with binoculars or a lensed finder, and dissolves into dozens of stars in a low-power telescope.

Why It's Cool

Also known as the Beehive Cluster or Praesepe, M44 is visible to the unaided eye on clear, dark nights far from lights, and was known to the ancients. It's about 590 light years distant, and its inner core is about 25 light years in diameter. Thought to be some 600 million years old, M44 has about 1000 members. Two of its stars are known to have exoplanets orbiting them. M44 looks good in binoculars, and even better in a low-power telescope—it may fill your low power eyepiece view and is one of the best open clusters in the sky.

Acadiana Sky

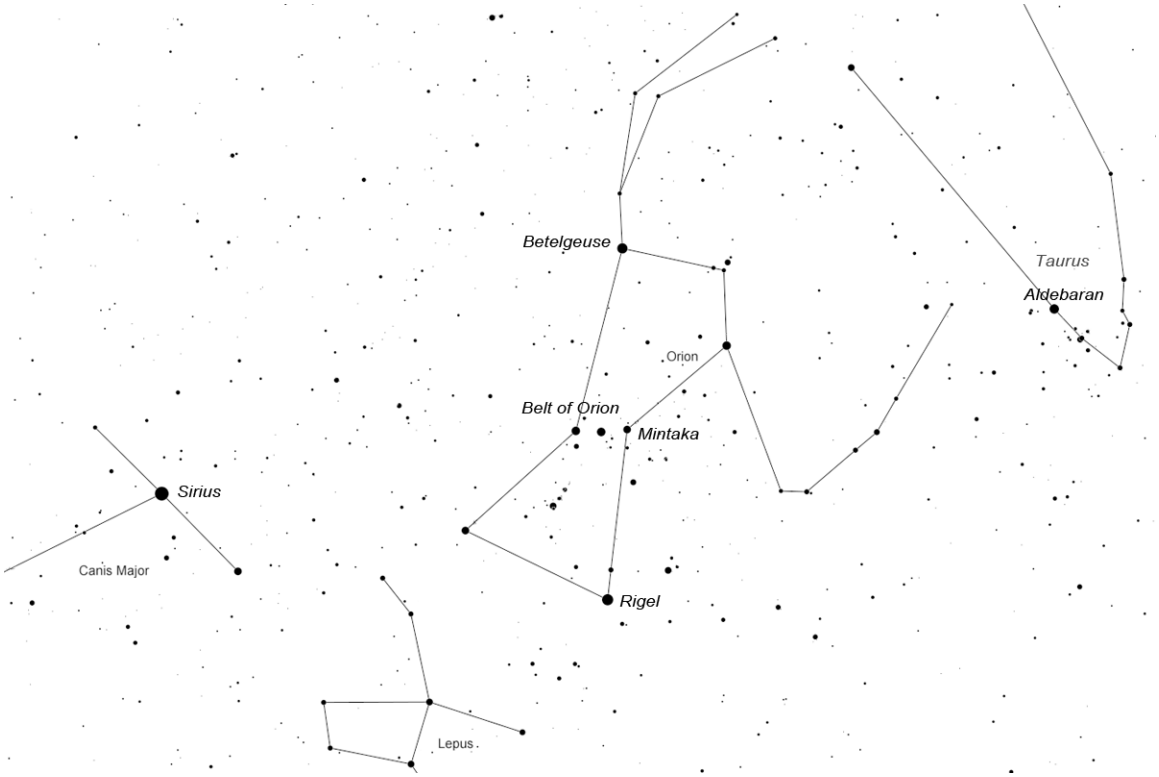
Mintaka (Delta Orionis)

Find this part of the sky using
Acadiana Sky Star Maps

What It Is

Mintaka is the rightmost star of the Belt of Orion. It appears binary in backyard telescopes.

Where It Is



Mintaka is very easy to find—it's the right-hand star of the famous Belt of Orion. The three stars of the Belt make a striking feature of the Winter and early Spring sky, and identification is helped by the presence of bright Betelgeuse above them and bright Rigel below them. Mintaka and the other Belt stars are easily visible to the unaided eye on clear nights.

Why It's Cool

Mintaka is actually not just a binary star (2 stars orbiting a common center of gravity), but a multiple star with at least 5 components. Only two can be seen in backyard telescopes. The brighter component itself is actually a set of three stars orbiting each other. Lying at a distance of 1200 light years, Mintaka is one of the more distant stars easily visible to the unaided eye.